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Are These Myths True?

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Abstract

Discusses the nature of myth, mythopoeic play, and the “realness” of mundane and created worlds in her Guest of Honor address. Appended are audience questions.

Keywords

Myth—Definition; Myth, nature of; Myth, role of

ARE THESE MYTHS TRUE?

by Mary McDermott Shideler

Mary McDermott Shideler was the Guest of Honor at Mythcon II. Her credits include two comprehensive books on Charles Williams, two unique theolgical works about her own experiences, and a thoroughly delightful and refreshing personality. This address was given prior to the presentation of the dramatic adaptation of The Greater Trumps in the form of a masque.

On the blackboard in one of the rooms upstairs is written, "You are, are you?" Am I? And who am I? All of you already have some impression of who I am, but I thought it only fair to warn you, before I begin, that I am a middle-aged, middle-class, Middle Western housewife. I am greatly honored to have been invited to be here. I like you very much, and I am glad that you have seemed to like me.

Whenever I get up before an audience, which is not very often, I begin sooner or later to ask myself, "What are you doing here?" My place, after all, is behind a desk, with a pencil in one hand, an eraser in the other, and a cup of coffee and an ashtray at hand.

But on this occasion the question becomes more profound, because it is not simply a question of what I am doing here, but "What are we doing here?" What is going on at Mythcon II? Are we playing games or celebrating a religious rite, or are we doing both at once, or alternately? Are we, as some people have claimed, escaping from reality, or are we escaping into reality, or doing both, and if so, which is which?

Very much the same questions arise concerning poetry, and what gave me the clue to my answer is a statement that Charles Williams makes in The English Poetic Mind, where he wrote, "Poetry is a good game--let us take it lightly. But it is also 'liberty and power'--let us take it seriously."

As a game, poetry and the mythopoeic activities are pursued for their own sakes. They have more or less arbitrary rules, like rules for a sonnet or for chess, or even the rules of avant-garde or abstract painting. Further, they are activities pursued for reasons which are unintelligible to anyone who is immune to that particular kind of pleasure. Thus there are games for which I have no affinity whatsoever: golf, bridge, football, and I know people who are bored to the point of frenzy by the games of poetry and myth and even, astonisngly, of theology.

The mythopoeic game is related to other kinds of games, notably sports and the arts, but the one that I want to pursue at the moment is the parallel with art--as a game--because its function is not to instruct or persuade, but to illuminate and enjoy. Now the subject of enjoyment is itself worthy of a book, and I have been greatly enriched by the one written by Walter Kerr, called The Decline of Pleasure, which I commend to you.

Among the functions of games, of play, are to release us from the ordinary, and to tap the wellsprings of delight. It was G. K. Chesterton who wrote, regarding Francis of Assisi, that "laughter is as divine as tears" --and, as well, beauty is as meaningful as truth. But one of the aspects of playing games is that there are usually spectators, who have a bad habit of trying to impose on the game ulterior motives, ulterior functions, because they do not understand the pleasures of the game itself. They turn play into something else, justifying sports, for instance, on the ground that they "develop sportsmanship" and "train people in physical and mental courage". Similarly, the arts are made utilitarian, as if their true function were to entertain, or to renovate society, or to reveal the nature of man with aesthetics giving way to philosophy. Children's toys must now be educational; they are developed and sold on the grounds that "they will teach your little one something".

I am strongly in favor of teaching and learning useful things, but we need also learn simply to enjoy things for their own sakes, not because they lead to a higher life or to greater skills. Indeed, a "higher life" and "greater skills" are enjoyed but they are not enjoyed as play, and Heaven knows, our world today needs play.

Critics of the myth-makers and myth-lovers often lose sight of the fact that what they are criticizing is a game. It may be more than a game, but it is certainly not less, and I know of no one who has described it better than C.S. Lewis in An Experiment in Criticism. He is speaking about the people who decry fiction of all kinds because, they say, "This is a lie. This is not the real world. This is a false picture of reality." And Lewis replies, "Surely the author is not saying, 'This is the sort of thing that happens'? Or surely, if he is, he lies? But he is not. He is saying, "Suppose this happened, how interesting, how moving, the consequences would be! Listen. It would be like this.' To question the postulate itself would show a misunderstanding; like asking why trumps should be trumps .... That is not the point. The raison d'etre of the story is that we shall weep, or shudder, or wonder, or laugh as we follow it."

The mythopoeic game is a very special sort of play. To illustrate, I want you to think for the moment about the likenesses in and differences between C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories and A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh books. Admittedly I read Winnie-the-Pooh too late: it came out when I was no longer a child. But I have read it, and for me it has no enchantment, whereas the Narnia series does. For me--probably not for some others--the forest in Winnie-the-Pooh is only itself; it does not refer beyond itself to the other great forests of myth, as Lewis' forests do.

At this point I had better define what I mean by myth, which I do hesitantly because I sympathize with Elrond's remarks the other night to the effect that it would take pages, if not books, to define the word. Here I shall take Charles Williams' own definition: a myth is a story when it is functioning as an image. As such, a myth can be a story taken from history: in Arthurian Torso, he suggests that the Battle of Britain (which was going on at the time he wrote this) could be seen mythologically because it pointed beyond itself; it was a lens through which one could see something that was more than merely the Battle of Britain. Myths can, of course, be deliberately fabricated, like Tolkien's Middle Earth and Lewis' Narnia.

The author's intention, however, has relatively little to do with whether a story becomes a myth. He may do better than he intended, or worse. We cannot define a story as being, in itself, either a myth or not a myth: it is how we use it that counts. We look at the story or through it, and the author can do no more than help or hinder us in doing one or the other.

In judging the quality of myths--that is, in defining the rules of the mythopoeic game--we apply some standards and not others. Williams writes that "In the myth we need ask for nothing but interior consistency". I would go one step farther and add a criterion which applies to all works of art: "the harmony of Style with Subject, and of Form with Vision". But in so far as myth is a game or an art (and that is all we are considering so far), we must not apply to it the philosophical criteria of "true" or "real", the historical criteria of "factual" or "accurate", or the psychological criteria of "escapist" or "schizoid".

The mythopoeic game is worth playing for its own sake. It is a good game, all the more because, as Charles Morgan once wrote, "When we play a game, we love to win and hate to lose; we don't stand aside in cold indifference but struggle passionately with every energy of body and mind". Then he goes on to specify what makes it a game: "yet ... another and deeper life continues independently of the game, and survives it and is not affected by it." "Poetry is a good game--let us take it lightly. It is 'liberty and power'--let us take it seriously."

Some of us--for reasons which, no doubt, a psychiatrist would have a lovely time analyzing--are impelled to go beyond the game of myth, not only privately but publicly. Through these myths, we have received a new life of liberty and power, and to deny it would be a form of apostasy, a betrayal. We have reached the point where we cannot unambiguously deny that the elven rings, the Holy Grail, the lamppost at the edge of the forest, are real. On the other hand, neither can we unambiguously affirm their reality. The mythical worlds have come very close to being that "other and deeper" life of which Charles Morgan writes, which continues independently of our games, and survives them, and is not affected by the games. It is not that the borderline between play and reality has become blurred. The borderline apparently stays where it was. But now we no longer know which world is on which side.

Of course we do not peruse the index of a scholarly work on ancient history, expecting to find the Shire listed along with Babylon and Tyre. We do not ask an anatomist--unless we know him very well indeed--to compare the skeletal formation of elves, dwarves, orcs,

and modern man--or Neanderthal man, for that matter. We may know exactly what street in St. Albans is the one where Pauline met the nameless suicide and her ancestor, but when we are on a tour of England, we do not ask the guide if he will point out the home where the great English poet, Peter Stanhope, once lived. Nothing is gained by confusing our categories, and so falling into delusion.

The historian concerns himself with a limited range of phenomena, the scientist with another range, the myth-maker with still another, and we do not confound the persons, although neither should we divide the substance. They are all talking about the same world, though approaching it from different directions and asking of the world different questions. Inevitably, therefore, the world gives them different answers.

What are the sources of the liberty and power that some of us have obtained through our acquaintance with Narnia and Middle Earth, and the very different world of eternity which Charles Williams introduces us to? Again I want to go back to Lewis' An Experiment in Criticism because, while he is speaking here of almost any literary experience, he is saying something that is profoundly important to understanding the mythopoeic function. In reading, he says, "We seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. And even when we build disinterested fantasies, they are saturated with, and limited by, our own psychology .... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own. We are not content to be Leibnitzian monads. We demand windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors. One of the things we feel after reading a great work is 'I have got out'. Or from another point of view, 'I have got in'' pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside.

"... The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness .... Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox; 'he that loseth his life shall save it'."

Of the ways in which myths contribute to our liberty and power, and to the enlargement of our being, there are four which I want to discuss this evening. The first is social: myths unite the people who share them. Our presence here is evidence of this function of myths. We have read and enjoyed the same books, even though we do not necessarily respond to them in the same way or give the various books the same importance. Here is together, a game we can all play, a sharing of scholarship, a joint search, which brings us closer together.

The second source of liberty and power in myth is its allegorical character---using the word "allegory" as Dorothy Sayers does in her interpretation of Dante's Comedy. The myths signify "something happening, or that ought to happen, in the real world"--so that for me, at least, through reading The Lord of the Rings, I came to see the ordinary world that I live in, in a new way. The book did not teach me a lesson; it gave me a new vision. It signified something beyond what Tolkien wrote.

It is interesting to note that Tolkien in The Lord of the Rings, Lewis in the Narnia stories and the first two of the Ransom books, are taking an imaginary world, a fantastic world, a world that in some sense they have created, and are using that to illuminate the world that we know ordinarily in our daily living. In contrast, Williams in his novels, and Lewis in That Hideous Strength, use the ordinary, commonplace, everyday world as itself an image of still another world, so that in one case, the imaginary world is the lens through which we see our daily world, and in the other, the daily world is itself a lens by which we see something that is still different. But in both cases, we are given a kind of map of a world, or more precisely, we are liberated as if by a map. The myths give us our bearings; they give us perspective. And, as well, they give us companions--not only each other, but also Frodo, Sybil Coningsby, Ransom, a companionship that reaches far beyond what we can touch, but not beyond what we can experience.

The third way in which myth liberates and empowers and enlarges, I have chosen to call the psychological, because the mythopoeic activities not only require, but are fundamentally based upon, the imagination as the bridge between the conscious and the unconscious functions of the self. Through myths and images, the unconscious is released into consciousness, and the unconscious can be controlled by the conscious mind in a creative interplay.

The great myths are those which evoke a response from something very deep in the unconscious of many people. The lesser myths reach fewer people, although perhaps no less deeply. But the tales of both reverberate through the distant caverns that the conscious mind cannot enter, except through images. Some things can be seen only in the dark; the light of day disintegrates them. If they are shrouded and masked in images, we can bring them forth and examine them as if by the sense of touch, but the X-ray analysis of the rational intellect, like Psyche's lamp, causes them to decay.

I want no one to suppose that the intellect, in all its rigor, is to be permanently excluded from the imagination, from the unconscious, or from the study of myths. The matter is one of timing. Most of us have been thoroughly trained, from the time we were in grade school if not before, in the skills of analysis, dissection, classification, but very little attention has been given in our formal or informal education to the arts of appreciation.

This bent is notably apparent in the fact that we leap very quickly, as a rule, into philosophical and scientific judgments. Or in reaction against our unbalanced education, we delay too long in using the intellect and lose ourselves in the teeming darkness. There are those who evaluate a story before they have surrendered to it, as well as those who abandon themselves under its spell. Both fall short of the exchange among powers and functions by which our fragmented selves are made whole.

It is all very well to assert that reason and emotion, consciousness and unconsciousness, body and spirit, are inseparable, so that to speak of ourselves as "fragmented" is to perpetuate the ancient errors of "faculty" psychology. In most of us, however, the elements or functions are not in balance and do not interact creatively. The "feeling intellect" is a state we can achieve only rarely and briefly. The hidden springs of life are commonly dammed up so that our conscious lives wither from lack of moisture. The noble word "integrity" describes what we should be, not what we are. How any of us should redress his particular balance is for him to determine--but it is unlikely that he can do so wisely except as he has companionship. "No mind is so good that it does not need another mind to counter and equal it, and to save it from conceit and blindness and bigotry and folly." You will remember this is part of Anthony's meditation in The Place of the Lion.

The fourth way in which myths are sources of power is the one I am least certain about, and have the most questions. But I do believe that in myths there is a metaphysical element in that we are introduced to, and sometimes initiated into, other worlds. Of the five other worlds I want to name, the first three I am willing to defend philosophically as being in some valid sense "real". The first is the ordinary, "natural" world of meals, jobs, moon-landings, traffic jams, books, loves. Then there is the "psychic" world of ESP, telekinesis, possibly retro- and pre-cognition. Third is the "spiritual" world of prayer, contemplation, the myths of Creation, Redemption, and Resurrection. But there are also two other worlds that I don't know what to do with. I have not made up my mind in what sense they are real or true. They are the worlds of witchcraft and Faerie. But however one names and divides the worlds, and whether one sees them as regions of one "reality" or as different "realities", myths do raise metaphysical questions and release, it seems, metaphysical powers.

And now, finally, I come to the point toward which all this preceding talk has been directed: Are these myths true? This is a question only you can answer. Each of you must answer it for himself, and if you permit anybody else to answer it for you, you are being irresponsible. The question itself can be taken in either of two ways, the first being, "Are the things which the myths point to true?" Given the definition of myths as images, they are pointing to something: is the thing to which they are pointing true? Is there a war between Good and Evil? Is there an interaction between Time and Eternity? Is Christianity true? Do we have hidden sources of power and creativity in the unconscious? Can they be reached by images? What about the reality of spirit, of Faerie, of witchcraft? And just to make the series complete, is the world of meals and jobs and traffic jams "real" and "true"?

If myth were merely a vehicle for conveying a proposition, like a fable, we could ask if the proposition were true or false, and that would be the end of it. We would say, for example, that The Lord of the Rings teaches us how people of different races can

work together and become friends (I have heard this seriously proposed as the sole and entire value of the trilogy). Or we could outline the plot to an acquaintance and save him the trouble of reading the book.

Instead, when we read it, we enter another world. But our sojourn in Middle Earth or Narnia or Aaron Lee's house is interrupted by a telephone solicitor. The chore of cleaning the bathroom obstinately resists our attempts to make it function as an image. Even though we feel that the myth introduces us to an existence which is more significant, and possibly more "real", than day by day events, some quality of resistance or continuity or urgency persuades us that the ringing of telephones and rings around bathtubs have an unassailable reality which Sauron's ring does not.

Or does it? Is not the world of the titanic battles between good and evil beings, of the co-inherence of time with eternity the groundwork of our lives, with our daily necessities and disturbances falling on it like rain and sunlight on bedrock? Where do we most profoundly and continuously and actively live? Where should we live? In the real world, of course, but how do we know what is real?

According to one philosopher, John Macmurray, we identify reality by its resistance against us--and because it resists us, it supports us. But there are many kinds of resistance and support, from the hardness of oak and iron to the mystery that thwarts our efforts to penetrate it. Faerie and the supernatural are of this second kind, to be meticulously distinguished from such so-called mysteries as the origins of the universe or the nature of flying saucers. The enchanted and the sacred do not resist intellectual research; they slip away from it like a drop of quicksilver under a finger. In the end, as Archdeacon Julian Davenant says in War in Heaven, "no one can possibly do more than decide what to believe." As individuals, we decide for ourselves, but also, as companions we agree together.

Having asked whether the myths serve to image truths, we must go on to ask whether they lead us into truth. And if, as I believe, truth must be defined as a relationship, not a series of propositions, then I would answer that the test of whether a myth leads to truth is whether, in following it, we find that we belong to what Charles Williams has called "The Order of the Co-inherence."

Q&A

FOREWORD

These questions were taken from a tape made at the time of Mary Shideler's speech. Because some people were very far from the microphone, and because of audience noise, etc., the transcriber was not always able to make out all the questions, or could hear only intermittent parts. As a result, the questions have all been altered and adjusted to fit the transcribers' idea of what the idea of the question was, and then further qualified by Mary Shideler. Also, Mary's answers have been changed and added to, etc., by Mary, to make answers clearer. To those who asked questions, I apologize for this and I hope that the problem can be worked out for next year. Thank You — Jim Carleton

Questions to Mary Shideler

Q: How would you define 'Faerie'?

A: I don't. The nearest I can come to defining either witchcraft or faerie is a comment by C.S. Lewis in (I think) Arthurian Torso, where he characterizes faerie as being "older, wilder, and less earthy" than humanity. And witchcraft is, it seems to me, older, wilder, and more earthy. I don't call that a definition, but at the moment I can't do more than that.

Q: I Believe you said something about the psychic world. From what I know of witchcraft, I would tend to say that precognition.... (tape unitelligible)?

A: This is one of the many things I am not sure about, how any of these areas is related to the others: whether the psychic is part of the divine, or witchcraft and precognition belong together, or what.

Q: In That Hideous Strength, the magic of Merlin is coming out of nature, but there is also a spiritual operative magic. I suppose that that would be more on the order of witchcraft?

A: Sometimes think that the relationships between the natural and the divine are like that between red and yellow. You know there is a difference between red and yellow, but where to draw the line is quite another problem.

Q: You said that you would be willing to study the metaphysical nature of spirits as being in some sense.... ?

A: .... Please understand that I am following C.S. Lewis here, and Lewis is perfectly explicit, as is Williams; spirits can be either good or evil.

Q: I guess I don't understand how we are distinguishing witchcraft from sorcery, let us say?

A: How you're distinguishing, I certainly don't know. And I don't know that I am distinguishing them at all, at this point. I'm feeling around with the problem. Until I've played around with it a bit, I won't know whether it's useful or not to differentiate these areas at all.

Q: What would you say about the power of prayer? I have found it a powerful influence in my life and I was wondering about your thoughts on the matter. Is prayer useful?

A: Yes. In C.S. Lewis' Letters to Malcolm, he discusses this. It is the best study of the subject I know of....

Q: In Williams' Descent Into Hell, he talks about Wentworth's seeing the image of the girl that he loves. Is this image some mental hallucination, or is Wentworth applying some mental power of his mind?

A: This I don't know. There is one piece of indirect evidence on that, however: every one of Williams' major ideas that appears in the novels, also appears in one of his theological or literary works. For example, the doctrine of substituted love is not only exhibited in Descent into Hell, but discussed in He Came Down From Heaven. I do not know of any place where he suggests that anything like the creation of the succubus, or of the creature in The Noises that Weren't There, was something that he took seriously--that it was more than a legend which he employed here for its dramatic effect.

Q: You said that the "Winnie-The-Pooh" stories didn't have any appeal for you?

A: It's not that they don't have any appeal; they do. But they don't, for me, hold any enchantment.

Q: All right. However, you said that you don't see any imagery in them, that the forest is just that and doesn't reflect other forests, etc. I happen to disagree with that view. But I would like to know why not. Is there something about the style of writing, or what?

A: I didn't say that they weren't images. In fact, you're backing up my point--that people look differently on these things. There are people who react in other ways than mine, people like yourself for whom they are images. But they aren't for me.

Q: I realize that, but I was under the impression that images were always images, and that they could only be accepted or rejected. Apparently it goes deeper than that. Or am I accepting images that aren't there, or are you rejecting the images!

A: On the Pooh stories, it may well be that they aren't images for me because I didn't read them until I was very grey-haired. There are things that you should read only when you're young, or read for the first time when you're young. On your broader question, I suggest that you read the first chapter of my Theology of Romantic Love, the material for which was culled from Lewis, Williams, and Dorothy Sayers. Briefly, anything can be an image; whether in fact it does function in that way depends upon the individual's response. For Dante, Beatrice was an image of God. In all probability, most of the other people who knew her saw nothing divine about her. She was a channel of grace for him, not for them--they doubtless had other channels, which were not images for Dante. "Image" refers to a function, not an essence or substance of a person or event or story, and the function varies.